

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-25

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SUBJ: OPORTO UNIVERSITY BUILDING BURNS

SUMMARY: OPORTO UNIVERSITY'S MAIN BUILDING, HOUSING ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES AND THE FACULTIES OF SCIENCE AND ECONOMICS WAS PARTIALLY DEMOLISHED BY FIRE WHICH BROKE OUT AT 4:00 AM ON MORNING OF APRIL 20. SEVERE DAMAGE CAUSED BY FIRE HAS PRODUCED DISRUPTION OF CLASSES PENDING EFFORTS TO FIND TEMPORARY CLASSROOM FACILITIES. ALTHOUGH FIRE INSPECTOR FOR NORTHERN REGIONS AND OTHER LOCAL OFFICIALS HAVE THUS FAR DECLINED TO SPECULATE ON ORIGIN OF FIRE, IT IS WIDELY RUMORED THAT IT WAS THE WORK OF ARSONISTS. END SUMMARY

1. FIRE ENGULFED THE UNIVERSITY OF OPORTO'S PRINCIPAL BUILDING EARLY MORNING OF APRIL 20, CAUSING EXTENSIVE DAMAGE TO SCHOOL'S ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICES, RECEPTION ROOMS, ARCHIVES, ECONOMIC LIBRARY, SCIENCE LABORATORIES AND CLASSROOMS OF THE FACULTIES OF SCIENCE AND ECONOMICS. FIRE, WHICH WAS FIRST REPORTED BY PASSING TAXI DRIVER SHORTLY BEFORE 4:00 AM APRIL 20, QUICKLY SPREAD THROUGH 170-YEAR OLD BUILDING WHICH OCCUPIES SQUARE BLOCK IN DOWNTOWN OPORTO. RECONSTRUCTION OF BUILDING WILL

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BE EXTREMELY EXPENSIVE AND TIME CONSUMING, AND UNIVERSITY

AUTHORITIES ARE PRESENTLY SEEKING TEMPORARY CLASSROOMS IN ORDER TO RESUME THE SUSPENDED CLASSES. ARCHIVES' MANUSCRIPTS AND LARGE NUMBER OF RARE BOOKS, PRINTS AND SCULPTURE DAMAGED OR LOST IN FIRE ARE IRREPLACEABLE.

2. ORIGINS OF FIRE ARE THE SUBJECT OF INTENSIVE CONJECTURE IN OPORTO WITH POLICE, FIRE INSPECTORS AND UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS THUS FAR REFUSING TO SPECULATE. OFFICIALS HAVE FOR MOMENT RULED OUT FAULTY WIRING AS BUILDING WAS COMPLETELY REWIRED DURING LAST FEW YEARS AND FIRE ALARM SYSTEMS WERE IN WORKING ORDER AT TIME OF FIRE. FIRE APPARENTLY STARTED IN SALAO NOBRE RECEPTION HALL WHICH IS NOT ELECTRIFIED. ALSO SUSPICIOUS IS UNUSUAL RAPIDITY WITH WHICH FIRE SPREAD.

3. MOST PLAUSIBLE OF MANY RUMORS BEING CIRCULATED IS THAT FIRE WAS DELIBERATE ACT OF STUDENTS OR STUDENT-CONNECTED ARSONISTS WHO LEFT INCENDIARY BOMBS IN BUILDING DURING EVENING OF APRIL 19. THEORY IS BASED ON ALLEGED STUDENT OPPOSITION TO A UNIVERSITY SPONSORED BOOK EXHIBIT WHICH WAS TO HAVE OPENED SAME MORNING AS FIRE. OPPOSITION TO EXHIBITION BASED ON FACT THAT ONLY A SMALL PORTION OF BOOKS TO HAVE BEEN EXHIBITED WERE WRITTEN OR PUBLISHED IN PORTUGAL. THEORY SUPPORTED BY FACT THAT PREPARATION FOR EXHIBITION CONTINUED UNTIL LATE EVENING OF FRIDAY AND NECESSITATED A LARGE NUMBER OF PERSONS COMING AND GOING FROM BUILDING AS WELL AS A LARGE QUANTITY OF PACKING CASES AND BOXES USED TO CARRY BOOKS BEING STORED THERE OVERNIGHT. LAST PERSON TO LEAVE BUILDING PRIOR TO FIRE WAS STUDENT WORKING ON EXHIBIT WHO, HOWEVER, REPORTS THAT NOTHING UNUSUAL OBSERVED PRIOR TO HIS DEPARTURE LAST FRIDAY NIGHT.

COMMENT: REACTION TO DESTRUCTION OF BUILDING, ONE OF OPORTO'S PRINCIPAL ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS, IS ONE OF SHOCK AND SURPRISE HEIGHTENED BY UNUSUAL CALM PREVAILING AMONG OPORTO STUDENT BODY IN PRECEDING MONTHS. DISCIPLINARY MEASURES INTRODUCED IN 1973 PLUS PRESENCE OF POLICE "OBSERVERS" IN UNIVERSITY BUILDINGS HAS PROVED MOST EFFECTIVE IN PREVENTING MEETINGS AND PROTESTS. LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PREMISES REMAIN SEALED OFF FROM THE PUBLIC WHILE POLICE AND FIRE OFFICIALS SEARCH FOR PROBABLE CAUSE. IN THE MEANTIME, ARSON THEORY GAINING IN CREDIBILITY FOR WANT OF MORE PLAUSIBLE REASON. TAYLOR

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